



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Bureau of International Information Programs
USINFO Webchat Transcript

U.S.-Canadian Relations and Northern Issues

Guest: David H. Wilkins
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Time: 2:00 p.m. EST (1900 GMT)

IIP Moderator: Welcome to today's webchat! You are invited to begin sending your questions by typing into the space provided below. The live webchat will take place today at 1900 GMT.

Please note: We see your questions coming in, your questions and the Ambassador's answers will not appear on this screen until the live chat begins later today.

IIP Moderator: Dear participants,

We appreciate your questions and you are welcome to submit more than one. However, we kindly ask that you submit each question separately. Thank you.

Ambassador Wilkins: Warm greetings to our friends in the North of Canada. I am delighted to have this opportunity to "speak" with you today on-line. Traveling throughout this beautiful and vast country has been one of the highlights of serving as U.S. Ambassador to Canada. I have visited all of the Provinces and Territories, and I suspect that I may have met some of you in person during my visits to the North. And if I haven't met you yet, perhaps I'll do so on my next visit!

I am eager to hear from you and to learn what issues interest you; how you see the relationship between our two countries; and what you think will strengthen the already rich cultural and historic ties that unite us.

I would ask that you let me know who you are when you ask a question -- first name and affiliation (businessperson, student, teacher, private citizen, etc.) would be great.

Let's go ahead and get started.

Question [Hal Timar]: The Northern Canadian Chambers of Commerce are taking the lead in the creation of a circumpolar chamber of commerce. Does the Ambassador see a need for the US to participate in this initiative, in particular, the Alaskan Chambers of Commerce? What assistance can the Ambassador provide in helping us establish dialogue with the appropriate chambers?

Answer [Ambassador Wilkins]: Hal, thanks for your question! A Circumpolar

Chamber of Commerce sounds like a fascinating initiative, and as you point out, there would likely be considerable interest among businesses in Alaska. Our folks here at the Embassy and at the Consulate in Quebec can put you in touch with the right folks in the U.S. I look forward to hearing how this initiative goes.

Q [Perry Trimper]: Based on discussions with Paul Cellucci in our Community back in 2004, we and specifically 5 Wing Goose Bay asserted that it could be designated as an Emergency Preparedness and Security Services Centre for trans-Atlantic air traffic. We currently have up to 1,000 flights overhead each day and often host one of these planes unexpectedly due to mechanical, medical or security issue (e.g. Persons of Interest Check, 11 September 2001, air rage, other)

So thus while we provide this service - we are not officially recognized except by the carriers who appreciate the service and situation we can provide to all matter of issues. What we would like to do first of all is assert that we are an 'endorsed' (by US Gov't stop) for such matters. This will allow us to designate a strategic role within our own Gov't and allow us to recoup some of our overhead costs for providing this insurance policy. If we were not here, these 1,000 flights would have to follow a much more expensive and time consuming route.

What Sir would be your thoughts on this issue and what advice could you provide to advance this thinking - particularly with Minister Stockwell Day - Note that we had been in discussions with his predecessor DPM Anne McLennan in 2005.

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Perry, Transatlantic air service and cross-polar air service are extremely important to North America. And it's important to have a series of emergency sites available. I would like to ask my staff more about this and I will have someone pursue this off-line with you in the near future.

Q [Ken Agar]: Global warming is changing the nature and form of the northern part of Canada. The North West Passage has historically been in Canadian Waters. Canada has exercised sovereign rights over the area for an extended period of time. As the environment allows for greater use of the Passage will the Canadian Claim to the Passage and Archiplego be honoured?

This topic has great significance for the North since any environmental accidents will become the de-facto and de jure responsibility of Canada. The area would not be protected under current international agreements.

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Hello Ken,

That is a very good question, on an issue that is of great importance to both our countries. It has been the position of the United States for the past several decades that the Northwest Passage is a strait used for international navigation -- under the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention this means that all ships enjoy the right of transit passage. A large majority of countries in the world share this view, although Canada does not. This difference of opinion does not mean the United States is insensitive to Canada's views regarding the North, and we are actively working with Canada to address many issues of common concern.

The United States and Canada, along with other Arctic nations, are leading an Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, to be completed in 2008, which will develop an Arctic-wide view of the changing uses of the Arctic Ocean and the impact that shipping may present for the environment, the people and cultures of the region.

In short, while our two countries may have differences over the Northwest Passage, we share many common goals: we have a shared interest in the security of the region; we have a shared interest in marine safety and the protection of environment in the region, and if shipping is going to bring new economic activity to this region as a result of climate change, technology or both, we have a shared interest in seeing that the benefits outweigh the costs for all concerned.

Q [Shelly Elverum]: Good afternoon,

My name is Shelly Elverum, and I live in a Nunavut community called Pond Inlet on the north end of Baffin Island.

I am an anthropologist who has lived in the community for 6 years, and am very interested in issues of health, wellness, pride, etc. I am concerned about the US not recognizing Canadian sovereignty of arctic waters. The Inuit feel such a strong sense of pride and purpose through their involvement with activities like the Arctic Rangers program, and their active role in maintaining sovereignty in Canada's arctic.

To not acknowledge Canada's sovereignty is a HUGE blow to the pride of the aboriginal people who are working hard to maintain it. In a place with few career options, being "on the land" is vital to emotional well-being and cultural pride. A large part of this is traveling and hunting on sea ice, which is now being affected by climate change, and is now contested by the US as international waters.

Your views on this would be appreciated.

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Thank you for your question. Our position has been consistent for many decades. We are not questioning Canada's sovereignty. We have simply said that the Northwest Passage is a strait for international navigation. That position is shared by many countries of the world. See the answer posted above to Ken Agar on this same topic.

Q [Joël Plouffe]: Dear Mr. Ambassador Wilkins,

I am a research fellow at the Raoul Dandurand Chair of Strategic and Diplomatic Studies at the University of Quebec at Montreal. I focus my studies on U.S. interests in the North and Canada-US relations in the Arctic. Thank you for taking time in discussing with us. We will be organizing next April in Montreal an international conference themed The United States, Climate Change, and the Arctic. Renewed American Interest in the North? My questions are oriented around this.

Here are my questions. The first one is on the International Polar Year (IPY).

1. Haven been to Alaska, it is pretty clear that Alaskans firmly hold to their identity as northerners and strongly believe in the development of

the last frontier. With the International Polar Year starting in March, it is clear that Alaskans will be proud in exposing their State and their northern culture. In what way do you think Americans from the lower States will understand the importance of the IPY and how will they respond to all the activities surrounding this important event? Second, how do Americans south of 60 perceive their northern State and what is the importance of Alaska in Washington? Is it only the oil and richness of the North? Or does the American interest vis-à-vis the North go beyond economics and national security? And, of course, can we speak of a renewal of the American interest in the Arctic? Finally, how do you qualify the American Interest in the Arctic?

I hope these questions will be of interest to your Mr. Ambassador.

Thank you once again and hopefully we will have a chance to speak on this again in the future.

Joël Plouffe

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Thanks for the questions, Joel. International Polar Year is a very important initiative for the U.S. Most Americans will regard IPY as a cooperative endeavor to explore the whole range of scientific issues on the Arctic. Alaska is important to us economically, culturally and strategically. It is, after all, our 49th state. We're all involved in Alaska and recognize the strong ties between Alaska and Canada's North.

Q [Perry Trimper]: What is the possibility of Canada and Goose Bay becoming re-engaged in the BMD Program. Our Base (5 Wing) was designated a preferred location for the X-Band facility. Can you comment on whether the door is still open for our involvement or did we slam it shut in early 2005?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Presently, I am not aware of any ongoing dialogue regarding the BMD program.

Q [Honourable Larry Bagnell M.P. Yukon]: I understand that for the land border crossings under the WHTI, you are seriously considering the implications of the JAY Treaty and ensuring that it is as reasonable as possible for North American Indians to cross the border. This is very important to us. Could you please give an update on the progress in this regard?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Hi, Larry! Glad you could join us today. This is an issue that is certainly being discussed prior to the rules being promulgated. The land border rules are being drafted at this time. We expect them to be published in the next month or two. At that point, there will be a period for comments before the final rules are in place. Please encourage Yukoners to review the draft rules and submit their comments as instructed in the Federal Register notice.

Q [Joël Plouffe]: Dear Mr. Ambassador Wilkins,

2. Here is my second question. It is on national security. Canada and the U.S. have always had strong cooperation in the North American Arctic (even if some events have provoked tensions - like sovereignty issues over the waters of the Northwest Passage). Since the end of the Cold War, scientific interests have seemed to have taken over in the North American Arctic and

Cold War tensions have - in some way - fallen with the end of the Soviet Union era. With climate change and new kinds of threats emerging, what do you believe should be the Canada-U.S. strategy to tackle threats such as ice melt and increase commercial activity in the North, environmental issues, possible terrorist activity and drug smuggling? What form of cooperation is needed and how will both governments consolidate their relationship. Is this important in Washington and what steps should be taken on these issues?

I hope these questions will be of interest to your Mr. Ambassador.

Thank you once again and hopefully we will have a chance to speak on this again in the future.

Joël Plouffe

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: We have great cooperation with Canada in the Arctic across a wide range of issues. We are partners with Canada in the Arctic Council, and the Northern Forum actively supports cooperation among regional (sub-national) governments. Safety of transport in the Arctic, and search and rescue are also important areas of joint endeavor. Finally, our Arctic Research Commission and Canada's Polar Commission meet regularly. We regard these cooperative efforts as greatly important, and we value Canada's cooperation. My staff would be glad to provide you additional information on these efforts.

Q [Wendy]: Hi Mr. Ambassador, What is your favorite Canadian hockey team?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: In my 20 months in Canada, I have become a huge hockey fan and have seen the Ottawa Senators play on many occasions. They have become my favorite Canadian hockey team.

Q [Parsley]: Good afternoon Ambassador Wilkins,

My name is Annemieke Mulders. Back to the Northwest Passage issue, I understand that our countries do not agree on the legal status of the strait. However, I would like to know if your government will support measures to ensure international shipping in these waters will conform to Canadian standards in environmental protection, ship safety standards, etc.

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Hello Annemieke,

The Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment, which Canada and the United States are leading, along with other Arctic nations, is an effort to develop a view of the changing uses of the Arctic Ocean and the impact that shipping may present for the environment, people of Arctic and their cultures. I am confident that our shared interest in marine safety and protection of the environment in this region will result in effective safeguards.

Q [Wendy]: Mr. Ambassador, Have you ever seen the Northern Lights?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Wendy, not yet. But I have visited Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Iqaluit. I plan to travel even further north this summer. I did have the opportunity to pet a wild polar bear in Churchill last summer. It was heavily sedated and I didn't do it for very long!

Q [Larry Bagnell]: Can you ensure my office gets contacted when the rules come out? Thanks. Larry

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Sure, Larry. We'll make every effort to get you the information as soon as we have it. It's always a pleasure to work with you!

Q [Guest - Colin Saunders, Community Economic Development Officer at the Hamlet of Pond Inlet]:

What research information has the US Government used to validate their information stating that the Polar Bear could be considered a "species at risk"?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: The Fish and Wildlife Service is embarking on a 12-month study to determine whether or not the polar bear should be declared a threatened species. The Fish and Wildlife Service will be pleased to consider your comments on polar bear populations. I had a very good conversation just recently here in Ottawa with Nunavut Premier Paul Okalik. He made some very compelling observations about the importance of the polar bear to cultures and economies of the North.

Q [Suzanne Lalonde]: Suzanne Lalonde, Professor international law, Université de Montréal

Two questions have already dealt with the issue of the Northwest Passage and as you so rightly point out, the US has maintained the same legal position for a number of decades. However, I can't help but ask you about the strategy of relying on international standards as the best mechanism to defend the Arctic (without creating an inconvenient precedent for the US). Would the United States be prepared to participate in a mandatory regime of international controls. I was under the impression that recent negotiations around a mandatory polar code collapsed because of US objections on this critical issue. Many thanks for considering this rather thorny question.

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Suzanne, I appreciate your question. I understand that you hosted a very thoughtful conference on all these issues recently. Therefore, I want to answer this for you fully so I am going to forward this to colleagues in the Department of State and then get back to you. We'll post this on this site when we have an answer.

Q [Larry Bagnell]: Is there any activity on our mutual discussions on the International Border in the Beaufort Sea?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: I am not aware of any recent developments, Larry.

Q [Parsley]: At this time of tremendous concern over border security, is your government satisfied with Canada's military capabilities to monitor the Canadian Arctic region?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: The United States government greatly values the productive relationship that exists between our two militaries. We are working very closely with the Canadian military to enhance their capabilities. Canadian Forces Canada Command is responsible for domestic security but is also responsible to work together with U.S. Northern Command for the combined defense of the North American continent. Additionally, NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command), a

fifty-plus-year binational treaty has adopted, in addition to its aerospace defense role, a new maritime warning responsibility to continue to build Continental Defense.

Q [Guest, Colin here again]: I would consider this part 2 of the question on Polar Bears. Considering that scientists in the north are finally accepting the long said knowledge of Elders in Nunavut who are saying that our Polar Bear population is growing. What measures can you assist us in to protect our interest in accepting American sport hunters to our territory. We do understand that there is a concern on the part of the US government to protect the Polar Bear, but what can you do to protect the interests of our community members and outfitters who rely on Sports Hunts for income. Considering our size of our territory and our population, what could you do to help protect our economic interests in this matter?

I appreciate you taking your time to hear our concerns.

Thanks, Colin

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Again, Fish and Wildlife Service is anxious for input from interested communities. We would urge you to look at the Federal Register notice and submit your comments accordingly. Your input could be valuable.

Q [Shelly Elverum]: Mr. Ambassador,

This is Shelly Elverum once again. Thank you for your response above. Shipping is only one of the issue facing traditional Inuit use of arctic lands and waters. The community of Pond Inlet is one of many where aboriginal groups are being confronted with expanding resource-extraction activities such as mining.

As this is occurring across the circumpolar north, and as Alaska natives have had a longer experience with such activities, I believe it would be extremely beneficial if there could be a mentoring programme between aboriginal communities in our two countries to share experiences and lessons learned. Can you give me any leads on how this might best be accomplished?

Kind regards, Shelly Elverum

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Great question and great idea! One place to start might be the Canadian Consulate General in Anchorage, Alaska. Also, there's the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, which might also be able to help. I'd like to have my officials do some more digging into this and whatever we find, we will post on our Canada "North of Sixty" Virtual Presence Post website: www.canadanorth.usvpp.gov.

Q [Larry Bagnell]: Ambassador, I just want to congratulate you on the extra efforts you have gone to include Canada's North with initiatives like this call. Your virtual Consulates in Nunavut, NWT, and Yukon are brilliant and extremely helpful for Northerners who need to work with your Embassy. Being from the far remote North, we often feel ignored or isolated, so we especially appreciate this extra attention you are giving us beyond the call of duty.

Larry Bagnell M.P. Yukon

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Thanks for your very nice comments. As you recall, you and I met just after I arrived in Canada, during my first visit to the Yukon, and I have appreciated your friendship ever since. I'll pass on your words to the dedicated staff who keep these websites up and running!

IIP Moderator: The "North of Sixty: Virtual Presence Posts in Canada" site may be viewed at: <http://www.canadanorth.usvpp.gov/nwt/index.asp>

Q [Hal Timar]: Two Northern Canadian Chambers, the Labrador North and Baffin Regional Chambers of Commerce are coordinating and hosting a ground breaking, business and cultural showcase of Nunavut, Labrador, Nunavik (and possibly Greenland and Iceland) being held at the Ottawa Congress Centre from January 30 - February 2, 2008. Would the Ambassador be willing to consider participating and/ or attending this major event? Could the Ambassador help with promoting this event to the American business community as an opportunity for interested organizations to meet the Eastern Canadian North?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: My Foreign Commercial staff can help you contact the right U.S. businesses. I will certainly consider attending the conference. Please send me the pertinent information.

Q [Parsley]: Annemieke here again. Ambassador Wilkins, do you foresee any conditions that may present themselves under which the US may again request that a NMDS base be established in the Canadian Arctic?

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: Annemieke, I am not aware of any ongoing dialogue on this issue at the present time.

IIP Moderator: A question via email:

There is an emerging consensus that Earth's polar regions are experiencing rapid change, whether measured in terms of climate warming, contaminants, new economic opportunities, and social/cultural viability. The United States and Canada share a significant interest and responsibility for the circumpolar region.

Three previous International Polar Years (IPY) have increased research activity in the polar regions, and have also left a legacy of major scientific and technological advancements as a result of the enhanced level of multidisciplinary international collaboration and cooperation. These IPYs also led major advances in non scientific fields, including involvement of citizens in the polar regions, training the next generation of scientists and engineers, and in the case of the last IPY (the International Geophysical Year of 1957-58), the establishment of a unique governance system for an entire continent and ocean region, the Antarctic Treaty.

Scientists, educators, artists, youth and others from 63 countries and an estimated 60,000 scientists are currently gearing up for the 4th IPY, a two year effort beginning on March 1, 2007. Canada and the USA are both seen as international leaders whose cooperation is critical to the success of Arctic research over the next few years. Canada will invest more than \$150 million in new Arctic research programs during IPY. However, many nations

are being challenged by short planning and funding timelines, and the sooner there is certainty about national contributions, the sooner plans and collaborations can be finalized.

Can you provide some insight as to the USA's contribution to help us with our strategic interest in supporting and enhancing Arctic science during IPY and beyond?

What legacies does the USA hope that this, the 4th IPY will leave?

Ian R. Church

Senior Science Advisor

Executive Council Office

Yukon Government

A [Ambassador Wilkins]: IPY is very important for the United States. We will be joining Canada for the official ceremony in March to kick off activities together. Out of IPY we hope to achieve greater scientific understanding of the North, enhance cooperation in managing fish and wildlife, and increase public awareness of the importance of the Arctic ecosystem. We will be working closely with Canada and other IPY nations over the next two years.

Ambassador Wilkins: Folks, I have really enjoyed this chance to chat with you. Your questions covered a wide range of interesting issues and I enjoyed hearing your views and concerns. Your input is important to me. I look forward to 'speaking' to you on-line again.

Guest: I would like to thank you for your time as well to hear our issues. It would be great to have more forums such as this in the future!

Thanks again.

IIP Moderator: We would like to thank Ambassador Wilkins for joining us today.

(end transcript)